

A Small Consolation

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Summary: Mulder's nightmares lead him and Scully to assist Sam and the VCTF on a serial killer case. Crossover between Profiler and XFiles.

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Rating: oh, I'd give it a PG Keywords: M/S friendship (maybe UST depending on how you look at it) SJR, the believer in me required it. :-)

Summary: When a string of kidnappings and murders hit Atlanta, the VCTF seeks to find the killer. Meanwhile, Mulder has been having strange dreams about several kidnappings . . . Can he and Scully work with Sam and the VCTF to catch the killer before he strikes again?

Spoilers: nothing too dramatic Time frame: XF- post Redux, pre The End Profiler- after Coop, but Nathan's still around in my world.

Feedback section: Please, please, please let me know what you think. I've never written a crossover before. Archival information: Okay for Gossamer and PFA. Any others please ask first.

Author's Notes: Before four days ago I never even considered writing a crossover fan fiction. Then Becky emailed me about one of my XF stories and mentioned it. So, Becky, you know who you are and this is all your fault! :-) Please keep in mind that this is a character-driven piece. If you're looking for action or graphic details, please look elsewhere. I only hope I've done right by the wonderful characters that are so apart of both series. Please don't flame me too badly, all right?

Disclaimer: X-Files- The characters of Mulder, Scully and Skinner and others previously associated with the X-Files are the property of Chris Carter, 1013 Productions, Twentieth Century Fox, and many others who have a lot more money than I do. Profiler- The characters of Sam, John, Bailey, Nathan, George, Grace and Chloe (any one else? *g*) belong to NBC, Cynthia Saunders, Sander/Moses Productions, but I can't remember the new producer's name at the moment. Official types: please play nice, I'm just a college kid. Besides, it wouldn't be good to annoy your fan base, now would it? :-)

A Small Consolation: A Profiler X-Files Crossover

Sunday, April 12 Atlanta, Georgia Crime Scene

Dr. Samantha Waters stared down at the body of a young girl where she lay in a damp Atlanta alley. Looking at the girl, she couldn't help but think of her own little girl, Chole. It was the third identical murder in just under a month, and they were no closer to solving the case than they had been when the previous victim had been discovered. The little girl was no more than ten years old, and Sam's heart lurched at the obscenity of it.

She recalled the relief she had felt when Grace had revealed there was no evidence of sexual assault. The relief was something of a double edge sword, because it made discerning the killers motives even more difficult. Closing her eyes against the sight in front of her, she sought to discover anything of the killer that might have been missed before. In her mind's eye, she could see him watching the girl from a distance. He would wait until he could strike, when others' attention was at its least. The catch was that he always abducted the young girls when they were in their homes, with at least one parent nearby.

She was uncertain, but for some reason she had the feeling that he thought he was helping the girls in some way. However, the connection wasn't falling into place. Sighing softly, she looked around the people gathered at the crime scene. Officers and medical personnel hurried here and there, yet she found herself unable to move.

A light drizzle began to fall onto the area when the evidence team was just finishing up. Detective John Grant walked over to where Sam was continuing to gaze at the ground. A flash of concern filled his blue eyes when he recognized the distant look on her face. Standing beside her, he spoke quietly. "Come on, Sam. There's nothing more that can be done here." She nodded silently, and walked alongside John back to the car they had driven to the alley only an hour before.

"I'm not sure why," she said quietly as she watched the buildings of downtown Atlanta pass by the window as John drove. "But I can't get a grasp on this one. Flashes, maybe. But the whole picture is a mystery. It's strange. I can run so far with it, and then it's like a door slams shut. There's something we're not seeing."

He glanced over at her, quickly returning his attention back to the road. There had been a note of defeat in her voice he was unaccustomed to hearing. When they first met, she had initially surprised him with her determination and tenacity. The longer they had known one another, the more endearing qualities he found in Sam.

It hurt him to see her so seemingly lost and confused. The case had the entire team rattled, and the pressure to catch a child killer was intense. It wasn't unheard of for the stress to cause someone to lose focus. *But not Sam* his inner voice insisted.

"We'll catch this guy, Sam," was all he said in response. The rest of the drive was silent, with each agent lost in thought.

Monday, April 13 Washington, D.C. Basement Office of Special Agents Mulder and Scully

Ever since arriving that morning, Scully had been surprised by the quiet atmosphere that had intruded upon the office she shared with Mulder. She had caught herself repeatedly glancing over at where he was sitting behind his desk. She was curious if something had happened over the weekend, but hesitated to ask. It was several minutes later that she noticed he had fallen asleep.

Given the opportunity to observe Mulder's appearance without being questioned or harassed, she took in his appearance. If she were to guess, she would say he hadn't gotten much sleep over the weekend. His hair was tousled and his face appeared drawn. Since he hadn't mentioned anything, nor had she received any late night phone calls during the past few nights, she was led to assume that he was having nightmares again. True, he did often call her after a rough nightmare, but more often than not he came to work the next morning looking much as he did at the moment. Like hell.

Crossing the office, she sat on the edge of his desk and felt his forehead for signs of a temperature. She didn't expect to find one, but was relieved all the same to discover she was correct. He stirred at her touch and she could see his eyes struggle to focus. After a few moments, he looked up at where she sat watching him intently.

"What?" His expression plead innocence, but Mulder knew better than to try and out bluff Scully. Switching tactics, he attempted to steer the conversation to work. "So, have you finished the reports that Skinner wants? It is your turn after all."

Scully closed her eyes and shook her head slightly. If he thought he was getting off that easy, he had another thing coming. "When is it not my turn to do the paperwork, Mulder?" She tried to smile, but her concern shone through in her eyes. "What happened to you this weekend?"

Mulder looked away from Scully's gaze. His eyes searched all over the office for something else, anything else to turn the conversation onto. He could tell she had guessed what had led him be in this condition. If it wasn't alien retro viruses, it was the demons of his own mind. Over the past month his dreams, which had faded somewhat in the previous weeks, had returned with a vengeance. He had started to tell Scully about them before, but hadn't wanted to bother her. Now he knew he would probably pay for that decision.

"The dream. The same dream I've been having for a month now, only different. I don't understand it. Each is the same, yet different. I can go for nights without one, and for four nights in a row they're relentless. This is the third time, and by far the worst."

Scully tried to recall if any times over the past month she could recall Mulder coming in to work in such a state of . . . She wasn't even sure how to classify it. Sadly, she couldn't remember. Scully had been distracted somewhat ever since Emily, and in her off time she had especially kept to herself. Clearing her throat she said, "I'm sorry I hadn't noticed, Mulder. What was your dream about? Do you want to talk about it?" The look of relief in his hazel eyes broke her heart.

He closed his eyes momentarily, and saw flashes of the dreams in his mind. "It starts like I'm dreaming about Samantha." Mulder was speaking slowly, he hated admitting his weakness over something that he could never see as anything but his fault. "We're in the house, playing Stratego. Then it changes. I'm not twelve anymore, the house is different, and the girl isn't Samantha. In fact, the girl and house are different every time." He paused, and Scully wondered if he was going to continue. "Then I'm not in the house, I'm with a man, and the man is watching the girl. Somehow, it's hard to explain, but he takes the girl. It ends with me chasing after him." Looking up at Scully, his eyes betrayed his confusion.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Her voice was a hoarse whisper, she couldn't believe she hadn't seen it before now.

Sighing, he paused before speaking. "I didn't want to bother you. You've had enough to worry about the past few months because of me without adding more."

"You should know that it wouldn't be a bother. That's what friends are for, Mulder. What do you think is causing the dreams?" He shook his head and shrugged his shoulders, signifying his lack of an explanation. "Do you remember the dates they happened on?" She crossed back over to where her laptop was set up, waiting on Mulder to speak.

"Do I remember? I wish I could forget, Scully. Let's see. The first time I had the dreams was in mid-March, the 16th through the 19th. The next was March 27th through the 30th. And this weekend, April 9th through the 12th. Why?" He stood wearily, and walked over to where Scully was sitting and read over her shoulder at the computer screen.

She finished typing in the dates, and then asked, "Can you describe the girls and the houses?" Scully switched over into professional mode, and silently hoped Mulder might do the same. She knew better, even before he started speaking with a tormented look in his eyes.

"Okay, the first girl had short brown hair. She looked about nine or ten years old, and she was wearing a blue pajama set. The house was split level, painted off-white. A minivan of some sort was parked in the driveway." As Mulder continued to relate the haunted images from his dreams, Scully typed wondering what had lead to such a situation.

Monday, April 13 Atlanta, Georgia VCTF Offices

The team had assembled early the next morning in the Command Center. No member appeared to be escaping this particular case unscathed. After allowing everyone a moment to be seated, Bailey began the

meeting. "Okay, we all know how important it is that we catch this guy. Does anyone have anything new to add?"

George was the first to speak up, he typed several commands into his computer and pictures flashed up onto the screen in front of the table. "The latest victim was Nikki Marie Walker. She was nine years old, and had been missing since she disappeared from her house three days ago, or two days before she was found. There was no sign of forced entry at the house, same as the other two." As he spoke, a school picture of Nikki Walker, complete with missing front teeth smiled down at them. It was followed with photos of the Walker's suburban two story house, house and the all-too-familiar alley from the night before.

When George finished his report, it was Grace who spoke next. "The autopsy revealed very similar results when compared to the previous two. There was actually very little trauma to the victim, like before. She appeared to have been smothered within twelve hours of the discovery of the body." Grace shook her head sadly as she spoke. "My best guess would be he used a pillow, possibly while she was asleep or drugged. By the time we found the body, any drugs would have broken down in the body."

"Okay," Bailey said. "Sam, do you have any thoughts?"

John glanced over at Sam when Bailey asked his question. He knew it upset her that she couldn't make one of her surprising leaps that might allow another little girl to avoid being kidnaped and murdered. He watched, concerned, as she slowly let out a long breath before speaking.

"I can't explain why, but I get the impression that our killer believes he is helping the girls in some way. It's like he feels that he is setting them free. I don't think there is a pattern as to which girl he chooses each time. It's possible he watches the local schools. George, could there be a connection in which school each of the victims went to?"

"Just a sec," George answered. A few seconds later, a map appeared up on the screen with markers on two different locations. "According to records, the first and third victims both attended Westside Elementary. The second was a student at LeMay Elementary, which is only a few miles away from Westside."

Sam studied the map before she continued. "Okay, there is the possibility that he is going back and forth between the two, or is selecting schools in that vicinity. George, could you mark the locations of other elementary schools in, say, a five-mile radius?" George nodded, and a few seconds later, three more blue dots appeared on the map.

"Who woulda thought Atlanta had so many elementary schools." John commented. When he received a look from Bailey to shut-up unless he had something useful to add, he backed down.

"Bailey, I'd suggest having regular patrols of police officers at these schools, concentrating on LeMay. We should also be able to assume that our killer lives in that area, especially considering that no one saw the girls after they were taken or before they were left. I still feel as if there is something we're not seeing."

Bailey cleared his throat, "All right people. Let's go back over what we do have. Nathan, what do you have from the first victim?"

Nathan thumbed through some paperwork before asking George to key up the photos of the first victim. "Okay. Diana Jo Norton. She was ten years old. Lived with her parents, John and Sue Norton in a split level house on East Peach Avenue. Both parents were in the house the night she disappeared, and neither heard anything. She was discovered missing when her mother went in to check on her about nine p.m. She was noticed missing on March 17 and found on the 19th."

"John, your report on the second victim?" Bailey requested.

"Courtney Anne Howard. Eight years old. She lived with her parents, Mary and Jordan Howard. The family lived on Central Avenue, nice house. George?" John motioned for the photographs from the second victim to be shown. She had long brown hair and large hazel eyes, a typical eight year old. "Her mother was still at the office the night she disappeared, however her father was in his study. There was a little brother asleep down the hall, but who wasn't disturbed. Her dad went to tuck her into bed and she was gone. He looked for her in the house and called the police, but no trace was found of either her or the kidnapper. That was March 28th, she was found on the 30th, two days later."

Bailey rubbed his eyes with his hands, somewhat lost himself. "And that brings us up Nikki Walker."

Tuesday, April 14 Washington, D.C. Basement Office of Special Agents Mulder and Scully

"Mulder, do you know anyone in Atlanta?" Scully asked when she walked into the basement office, only to discover that he wasn't there. "Where'd he go?" She wondered aloud.

"Where'd who go, Scully?" Mulder walked in behind Scully, and smiled when she jumped slightly. "Looking for someone in particular?"

She rolled her eyes, although she was relieved that Mulder was feeling well enough to be annoying again. It was a definite improvement over the day before. "The man of my dreams, Mulder. Too bad, I guess I missed him."

He moved around Scully to sit down behind his desk. "Ha, ha, Scully. I always did love a woman with a sense of humor. Too bad you don't have one." His tone was flat, but the grin on his face was unmistakable. "So, what's up?"

Scully pulled out a folder from the stack of papers she had brought back to the office. "This is what's up, Mulder. I ran the dates and descriptions you gave me through the database. I found something, quite, disturbing."

"You found something in the Bureau database about my dreams? Wait a minute, why did you even think to look there anyway? You usually don't make jumps like that. I mean they were just dreams after all." He watched as Scully pulled out several individual pieces of paper

from the manila folder. The fact that something might come of his nightmares bothered him, but he couldn't pass up the opportunity to harass Scully just a little.

Scully, for her part, just sighed. "It must be your amazing tutelage, Mulder. You're finally rubbing off on me. Seriously though, it just sounded like a bit of a stretch. And after the paper hearts case, well, I decided to play a hunch. The sad part is it played out." Mulder looked up at her, confusion playing across his features. Silently, he encouraged her to go on. "According to the information in the database, a string of kidnappings occurred in Atlanta. The dates overlap, Mulder."

Handing him the files, she continued. "You had dreams for four days at a time. Each time you did, one day after they began a girl was kidnaped. Each time when your dreams stopped, the same girl was found that night. Each was strangled and left in alleys across western Atlanta." As he scanned the information, Mulder felt his heart constrict. As much as he hated the nightmares, he never considered they might have such a gruesome connection.

Scully, for her part, was concerned about how Mulder would take the information for a slightly different reason. It was the similarity to Samantha's abduction that was nagging at her. She worried how Mulder might take it, if they were to become somehow involved in the investigation. Mulder, however, was already a step ahead of her. "Bailey Malone is listed as the Agent in charge. It's this Sam Waters that is familiar. I've read about the Jack-Of-All-Trades killer. She's supposed to be pretty good. I wonder if Skinner would scream too loudly about us flying down to Atlanta for a few days?"

Seeing the look in his eyes, Scully knew it was already too late. He was already determined to go to Atlanta, no matter how many pieces he fell into if another girl died. And she knew, without question, that it would be her he turned to when his world crumbled around their feet. A familiar if unfortunate pattern to repeat as often as they did.

"All right, Mulder. I'll back you on this one. Let's get a flight to Atlanta and contact Agent Malone before going to see Skinner. Then we can go home and pack. It's your turn to drive to the airport, you know. So you can pick me up an hour and a half before our flight." She could tell by the look on his face that he was somewhat surprised to win so easily. He nodded silently, and picked up his telephone to call the travel agency.

Scully, meanwhile, called the number listed for Bailey Malone at the Violent Crimes Task Force. After several rings, she was met with a gruff "Malone."

"Agent Malone? This is Agent Dana Scully in D.C. My partner and I might be able to help you in the case you're currently working on."

"Help, Agent Scully? Do you have some information?" Bailey was confused to say the least, as to how an agent in Washington might have anything valuable to their investigation.

Scully closed her eyes briefly. It was in moments like these that she understood what Mulder went through on a daily basis. "Yes. My

partner, Agent Mulder, has an angle on your investigation. We've arranged a flight to Atlanta and would like to assist your team."

Malone paused, she could hear him exhale loudly on the other end of the connection. "Agent Scully, really, we appreciate the offer, but . . . Wait. Mulder, as in Fox Mulder?"

"Yes."

She held her breath when Agent Malone didn't respond initially. "Your partner, Agent Scully, I've heard of him. He has a reputation for impressive leaps of logic, doesn't he? Maybe if he and Sam worked together . . . "

"Agent Malone, Mulder mentioned knowing of Dr. Waters. We're hoping that maybe we could help you solve the case. It's possible fresh eyes might see something previously overlooked. There is also another angle that is a bit complicated to go into over the phone."

"Okay, Agent Scully. I'll have Agent Grant pick you up at the airport. He can fill you in on any questions you might have on the ride to the Command Center. Do you have your flight times yet?"

Scully looked over to where Mulder was reading through the paperwork she had laid on his desk about the abductions. Covering the mouthpiece, she asked, "Mulder, did you get our flight times? I need to tell Agent Malone when to expect us."

Mulder read the scribbled note in front of him, and responded. "Seven fifteen, tonight. American flight 623." She repeated the information over the phone and hung up.

"Now the hard part," Scully said. "Now we have to tell Skinner."

Tuesday, April 14 Atlanta, Georgia Atlanta International Airport

For the fifth time in as many minutes John looked down at his watch, cursing under his breath. He knew something was up when Bailey called him into his office that afternoon. As far as he was concerned, they didn't need a couple of D.C. agents coming to Atlanta to breathe down their necks about not having the case solved. What added insult to injury was that he was forced to play cabdriver to them. Again looking at his watch and the monitor listing arrival times, he sunk into one of the molded chairs. Ten minutes late and counting.

Fifteen minutes later, the passengers of flight 623 began debarking. John was particularly aggravated by the fact he didn't know what they looked like, only that it was a man and a woman. Scanning the business attired travelers, his gaze fell onto a pair that fit the bill. Standing and moving to meet the pair, he asked, "Agents Scully, Mulder?" When each nodded their heads, he continued. "I'm John Grant, Bailey sent me to give you a lift to the office. The car is this direction." He gestured to the side with his arm. "Agent Scully, can I take your bags?"

She smiled, nodding her head no. "No thank you, Agent Grant. I'm fine." Mulder fought a snicker, at her insistence of being fine. Those words were so often heard coming from Dana Scully. She cut Mulder a look and he tried even harder not to laugh. John, for his part, grew curious of the partners. He could see a silent communication flying between the two of them.

A few minutes later, the three agents were nearing the parking deck. Clearing his throat, John resumed speaking. "I'm curious as to what you believe you can add to our investigation. But that aside, Bailey told me to answer any questions you might have."

It was Mulder who responded. "We've read over the information that was available in the Bureau database on this case. What would be helpful is anything that wasn't included, or anything that might not be easily included. What's your feeling about the case?" John looked over at the tall agent walking next to him, and was reminded briefly of when he first met Sam. He couldn't put his finger on it, but there was something about him that struck a familiar chord.

Unlocking the door to one of the team cars, he answered. "I'm not sure, exactly what you're wanting to hear, Agent Mulder. The abductions happen at random time intervals, we haven't determined a link between the victims to help us figure out how to outguess the guy." John noted the way Scully seemed to tense up at the use of the word *abduction*, but continued. "Sam's at a loss. We have no warning, and a very limited time frame after they disappear. We were called in after the second girl disappeared, shortly before her body was discovered."

Having let Scully sit in the front, Mulder had been leaning forward in the back seat to listen to what John was saying. At his mention of the girls disappearing, he felt a well-known emptiness in the bottom of his stomach. Fighting the customary surge of bile in his throat, he spoke. "It's only been a day since the last girl was found, so we should have some time before it's too late . . . " He let his statement hang open-ended. Scully closed her eyes, she knew what her partner was most likely going through.

John merely agreed. "Yeah, I just hope it's enough."

Tuesday, April 14 Atlanta, Georgia VCTF Offices

"Sam, I'd like you to meet Agents Mulder and Scully." When they had arrived at the office, most of the team was still there, even though it was far later than they usually stayed. Sam looked up from the paperwork on her desk to look at the three agents standing in the doorway to her office. Motioning for them to come in, she closed the folder.

"Sam, I've got some things to take care of in my office so I'll be there if you need me."

"Okay, Bailey. Thanks." She smiled as Bailey left her office and closed the door behind him. Returning her attention to the two still standing in her office, she gestured toward the couch. "Please have a seat. Bailey told me that you believe you might be able to help us with this case. I hate to admit it, but we are at something of a stalemate. We can't seem to get a break." She looked at the man sitting on the left, putting a face to the stories she had heard.

"You're Agent Mulder?"

He nodded his head. "Yes. I know we've never met, but I do know of your reputation as a profiler, Dr. Waters."

"As I you, Mr. Mulder. And please, call me Sam." She was having a difficult time overlaying the friendly man before her with the somewhat strange rumors that circled throughout the agent ranks.

"It's just Mulder, actually." Scully watched the exchange with some interest. The two were considered among the best of the best in their field. It might be interesting to see if it lead to a profitable paring or arguing and name calling. With Mulder one could never be too sure.

"Mulder. Okay. Agent Scully, I understand you were the one who thought the two of you might be able to help us out."

She nodded, and readied herself for what might be an interesting conversation. "When Mulder described some dreams he had been having, something about them struck me as familiar." As she spoke, Mulder slightly squirmed in his seat, and found his gaze wondering about the well-kept office instead of focusing on either of the two women seated near him. "I'm still not sure where I had heard about your case, but Mulder's description triggered my memory and when I checked the dates of his dreams verses the kidnappings, they overlapped."

Sam looked from the confident woman on her right, to the almost nervous man beside her. "Dreams?" Her question rang of a mix of disbelief and curiosity. "How could you gain information from your dreams, Mulder?"

"Scully's the one who put it together," he began, glancing over at his partner. Pressing forward, he continued. "For about a month I had been having these dreams, they would persist for about four days and disappear. Each time they began the same, but integral features would change during the duration. The appearance of the girl, the type of house. By this past Monday morning, I was miserable from lack of sleep. When I told Scully why I was such a mess, she just put two and two together somehow." While still somewhat skeptical, she could see in his eyes that he truly believed what he was saying. And, she reminded herself that he was regarded as an excellent profiler, with an astonishing closure rate. Even if his methods had earned him scorn and rebuttal from within the Bureau community.

"I'm guessing the details from your dreams also corresponded with the actual murders?" Mulder nodded, but stayed silent. "So what do you think we should do now?"

It was Scully who spoke up. "It would be wise to keep the investigation running the way you have it now, you obviously know what you're doing. The one advantage our being here might provide is that the dreams that led to our involvement seem to start a day *before* the kidnapping."

Sam's eyes shot open at that piece of information. "Before? You mean, we might be able to know when he will strike, even if not exactly where?" To this, Scully nodded her head in agreement.

"Depending on the depth of the dream, it's possible I can tell you a description of the house." Although Mulder was all business, both could see his hesitation at having to experience another round of nightmares related to something so close to his personal history. "However, we will only get one day's advance warning. That is, if the pattern continues."

Sam felt the first surge of hope she had known since March 18th. The idea of a dream leading to the answer still appeared as something of a stretch, but for a reason she couldn't explain she felt more comfortable with Mulder's extreme means of an answer, than with others' more conventional means. "All right, the two of you are now a part of the team. Hopefully, we'll be able to catch this guy before you have to experience another session of nightmares courtesy of our killer." Mulder blinked at her seeming ability to read his fear after such a short time. "But right now, it's late. I believe that Bailey has arranged for you to have two hotel rooms nearby, and I'll be glad to drop you off since it's so late."

Scully recognized the signs in Sam that she often saw in her partner, the mark of many sleepless nights. It piqued her curiosity about the profiler. She felt more confident that the pairing of the two profilers temporarily might not be such a horrible experience after all. "That's not necessary, Dr. Waters. We can drive ourselves, if we had access to a vehicle."

Sam smiled at Scully's insistence of being polite. "Really, it's not problem. And as I said, it's Sam, Agent Scully. We'll get you a car tomorrow, and Bailey or I will pick you up in the morning."

Scully was again pleasantly surprised by the informal atmosphere that so quickly developed between the three agents. She could only dream of such a transition with most of the other agents they worked with. Having "Spooky" Mulder for a partner did have its detractions. "What do ya say, Scully? Be chauffeured tonight and then back to the regular grind tomorrow?" She was relieved to see the grin cross her partner's face.

"You might not consider it such a grind if you ever let me drive, Mulder." Scully's voice carried from where she and Mulder were walking toward Bailey's office.

Sam smiled, listening to the banter that played between the partners. She too was surprised by how well the meeting had went. When Bailey had told her of Scully's phone call, she hadn't been sure what to think. What she had heard about the agents who manned the X-Files, as they were referred to, had been rumors of being difficult to work with, moody and just plain 'out-there'. At the time she had wondered just what the clinical definition of 'out-there' was. Thus, the people she had met that night led her to believe maybe it wasn't such a bad thing allowing the outside help, after all.

Having packed up the papers she wanted to take home, she closed her office door and started to walk toward Bailey's office. Before she walked five steps she was intercepted by John. "Hey, John. What's up?"

He pulled her over to his desk where they could talk. "How are you doing, Sam?" She could see concern in his eyes, and felt her heart

melt a bit. Grace had once mentioned that she thought Sam and John would make a nice couple, but Sam had laughed it off. It was in moments like this, when she felt her resolve soften some. Since Tom, intimate emotional feelings were something she tried not to allow herself. Her one mistake had been Coop, and she refused to allow a similar situation to develop with John.

"I'm fine, John. I'm just frustrated that we haven't made any headway on this case. These are just little girls we're talking about. No one deserves this." For just a moment she allowed her control walls to crumble. Talking to John had at some point become second-nature.

He nodded and pulled her into a warm embrace, she felt as if she might actually be able to feel strength radiate from him into her. John, on the other hand, believed the exact opposite. He had often been amazed by the stores of strength she held within. Pulling out of the hug, he whispered. "We're going to get this guy. Don't forget that."

Nodding, she commented. "Until tonight I was beginning to worry. But after talking to Mulder and Agent Scully, I have the feeling something's about to turn our way."

Confused, John sat on the edge of his desk. "What do these two hotshots have that's so great? I mean, they fly down here out of the blue, and all of a sudden, we're saved?" Sam recognized the mix of sarcasm and annoyance that laced John's words.

"Don't look at it that way, John. I was just talking to them, and honestly, I get the feeling they *will* be a great help. It's very complicated, and somewhat unusual so just trust me until tomorrow's meeting and then judge for yourself. All right?" He looked deep within her blue eyes and knew he had no reason not to trust her. She was one of the few people whose instincts he had learned to trust as much as his own. If Sam thought they could help, he would at least give them a chance.

She could see the gears in John's head cranking, and waited patiently to hear his response. "Okay, Sam. I'll give them a chance." She smiled, knowing how stubborn he could be. "Now," he added, "don't you need to get home to that adorable daughter of yours?"

Sam squeezed his hand softly, "Thanks, John. Thanks for always being there." As she walked away, he had to remind himself to wipe the large smile off his face.

Sam knocked on Bailey's office door, and entered to find both he and Mulder laughing and Scully trying very hard to look annoyed. Only she wasn't quite pulling it off. As it was, Sam could recognize a tension breaker when she saw one. "What's so funny?" She asked with a smile.

"You probably don't want to know," Scully admitted with a smile.

"Ah, one of those types, huh?" At that both she and Scully laughed, with Bailey and Mulder exchanging looks of *what just happened?*

"I'm ready to head out, if the three of you are finished." Bailey

nodded his head, and sat back down behind his desk. "So, Bay, what hotel am I taking these two to? The Ritz, right?" She laughed both at her own joke, and the partners reaction.

"Uh-huh. You know it," Bailey answered the bait. "The penthouse."

Mulder's eyes flickered recognition, and he decided to play along. "Does this mean I get to buy the pay-per-views on the tab?"

"Pay-per-*view*? Is that what they are calling the things you watch these days, Mulder? I can imagine someone's getting paid, but not for viewing anything." Sam shook her head, still amused by the relationship between the partners.

"Ah, anyway. Hate to interrupt the fun, folks, but it's the Ramada over on South Lakewood."

The three of them watched as Bailey began sorting through the papers on his desk. "Bay, don't you think you should head home too? Go see Frances. The two of you are still getting along okay, right?"

Bailey smiled. "Yes, Sam. Things are going okay. I'll be out of here soon enough. We're all putting in long hours because of this case. You should take your own advise and spend some time with Chloe. It will be close to her bedtime by the time you get back to the firehouse." Sam nodded, and led the two agents with her out of his office and toward the parking deck.

After the short drive to the hotel, Sam pulled up to the hotel and killed the engine. "Here we are. You should be all set if you just go into the office and give them your names."

As Scully was getting out of the car, she commented. "Wow, Mulder. This is way beyond the usual rat-trap flea bags we stay in. They might even have all the lights working."

"Just keep talking Scully, keep talking. Next time I'm going to make *you* deal with the hotels when we're on a case. Fun, it ain't." Mulder took both of their bags from the trunk of Sam's car and Scully pushed it closed.

Sam handed Scully a card with both her office, cell and home phone number written on it. "If you need to get in touch with me for any reason, one of these should find me. In the morning, call me about seven and we'll work out who will pick you up. See you in the morning!" Sam waited until they had entered the hotel office, and pulled out of the parking spot. Ever-mindful of the agents shadowing her until she reached the firehouse, she pulled out onto the nearly empty streets and headed home.

Wednesday, April 15 Atlanta, Georgia Ramada Hotel, South Lakewood Drive

Mulder knocked on the door separating his room from Scully's adjoining one. He waited a couple of minutes until he heard her muffled, "Come in, Mulder." He opened the door and looked around for Scully, finally deciding she was in the bathroom. Sitting down on the

end of the bed, he waited on her to finish.

When she emerged from the bathroom, he couldn't help but pick on her a bit. "This is a switch, Scully. Usually it's you having to wait on me to get ready. Have an excuse?"

Pulling on a black pump she responded, "Anything to give you a reason to harass me, I suppose." Her tone was snappish, but the glint in her eyes revealed all he needed to know about her intent. "Why don't you call Sam about a ride to the office. I'd like to get as much of a head start on this as we can."

Mulder nodded in agreement, and pulled the business card she had given them the night before out of his wallet. He grabbed the phone by the bedside and punched in a nine followed by the seven digits. After two rings, a female answered, but he was pretty sure it wasn't Sam. "Hello?"

"Yes, I was trying to reach Dr. Sam Waters . . . "

"May I ask who is this is?" Mulder could hear the hostility in her voice, and wondered if this was just a daily part of her life.

"My name is Fox Mulder. My partner and I were supposed to call Sam about a ride into the office this morning." He figured he might as well give who ever this was the whole story, seeing as how she determined if he spoke directly with Sam.

"Agent Mulder. Okay, yeah Sam said you would be calling. I'll go get her, hold on a minute." When he heard the phone being placed down, he realized that she had spoken so quickly that he couldn't have gotten in a word edgewise.

Mulder could hear the receiver being picked up, and was greeted by Sam's more familiar voice. "Mulder. Hi. You're ready I take it?"

"Yeah. Well, *I* am. Scully's taking her time over here." At that remark, Mulder found himself on the receiving end of a shoe being tossed across at him. He ducked, and continued speaking. "Seriously, though. We're ready as soon as you or Agent Malone are."

Sam laughed at the muffled noise on the other end of the line, and could guess that Mulder's comment had earned some payback. "Okay, great. I'm just fixing to leave and I'll be by to pick you up in about twenty minutes. Sound okay?"

"Sounds fine, we'll be downstairs waiting. See you then."

"Bye, Mulder." He hung up the phone and walked back over into his own room to get his jacket. He dreaded the morning meeting they were fixing to have to attend. Thanks to the jokes and jabs, it had been possible to at least push the haunting memory of the murders and dreams into a corner of his mind. But there was nothing that could drive them away entirely. Still he knew that what mattered was catching this guy.

"Mulder? Time to go." He heard Scully call out to him from in her room, and he shrugged into his jacket. Time to face the day, he figured.

Wednesday, April 15 Atlanta, Georgia VCTF Offices

Sam, Mulder and Scully arrived at the Command Center five minutes before the scheduled morning meeting. Here they were supposed to brief the other agents on Mulder's dreams and how they could help the investigation. After a quick trip to her office, Sam came in and took her usual seat next to John. Two extra seats had been pulled up to the center table to Sam's left, and Mulder and Scully sat in them.

Bailey began the meeting as usual. "The good news is we haven't had any reported missing children in the past day. The bad news is we're still no closer to guessing who we're looking for or how to find him. We've been joined by Agents Scully and Mulder, from Washington to help in this investigation. Sam?" It had been decided that the rest of the team might take it better if Mulder's dreams were explained by Sam initially.

"We're still stuck, but if it comes down to another abduction, we might have some warning this time. We were contacted by Agent Scully when she linked a series of nightmares that Agent Mulder had with the dates and events of this particular series of murders. The possible advantage is that these dreams always started a day *before* each abduction. It's a stretch, but for the moment it's our best option to avoid another death if we can't catch him before he strikes again."

"Agent Mulder," Nathan began. "Do you have anyway of knowing ahead of time when these nightmares might occur?"

Clearing his throat, Mulder responded. "Not any more so that anyone does of when he will strike again. I know when I wake up from the first of the nightmares. So far, they've been somewhat detailed about what the little girls looked like, and what type of house."

"But if you've been having these *dreams* since the first murder," John questioned, "why wait until now to come to try and help?" Sam glanced over at where John was sitting and silently willed him to try to cooperate. "Why not before the third little girl was murdered? Or the second?"

"I didn't know what I was seeing, Mr. Grant. It's not often one's dreams can assist in solving a serial murder case. I hadn't heard about this case until Agent Scully made the connection in the dates and details. As soon as we knew what we might be looking at, we called you. The last thing I want is for any little girl to suffer like that. Her or her family." John saw the shadows that lurked in Mulder's eyes and backed down somewhat. He had the feeling that Mulder was speaking of something beyond this investigation, something he had a personal connection to.

Meanwhile, as Mulder was speaking, Scully was hoping he could hold his temper. He was used to being questioned at his every move, that wasn't what bothered her. It was being almost accused to allowing two small girls to be taken from their homes and killed. Of all people, Mulder understood how the consequences of such an event could affect those involved. It was a relief when she saw recognition of this flash across Grant's eyes.

"Until you have another dream we just wait?" Nathan asked.

Bailey shook his head. "No, we continue with the investigation the way we were before Scully called. George, would you pull up the elementary school map again? This is what we were looking at yesterday morning. Since then, we've put plain clothes cops on patrol around the schools concentrating on recess and bus arrivals and departures. Our thought was that he would return to LeMay Elementary, if he is indeed following a pattern."

When the meeting ended each of the agents left the table, heading back to their desks. "I hate feeling helpless," John muttered.

Mulder stood saying, "I'm with ya there."

Sunday, April 19 Atlanta, Georgia Ramada Hotel, South Lakeside Drive

The case hadn't progressed as fast as anyone would have liked. The longer they went not only without catching the killer, but without even a suspect the more likely the press was going to explode. It was a small miracle they had managed to keep it out of the public eye as well as they had.

After another late night at the Command Center, Mulder had gone back to the hotel while Scully had gone back to the firehouse with Sam to go through some paperwork. Days of searching and late nights had lead to no leads what so ever. As he sat with his head leaning against the wall staring blankly at the television, he felt inclined to hit his head against the wall. He felt as Sam did, that there was something he was missing. Something small, but so important it would crack the case wide open if one of them could just put their finger on it.

As was the pattern he'd developed, he spent part of the evening recapping the case in his mind. Maybe tonight, he thought, would be when he saw what they'd missed. So far, there had been four previous *maybe tonights* and he was no closer than he had been Wednesday night. The case was truly a lesson in the aggravating. Not only could they not discern how he managed to get into the three houses undetected, but how had no one seen him with the girls or why no one had noticed him dumping the bodies. As the case continued, Mulder found it harder and harder to not think about Samantha. The photos of the girls could easily turn into her in Mulder's mind's eye.

He knew that Scully was concerned about his ability to distance himself from the crime in cases such as these. Mulder had seen some of the looks she was throwing his way, especially the night she had caught him at two a.m. up reading one Courtney Howard's files. It hadn't been lost on Scully that she was the only eight year old of the group, and the closest to Samantha in appearance as well.

Mulder was torn between being relieved he had yet to have anymore nightmares, and wanting to catch the guy. He knew their best shot came just after he had his next nightmare, because of the information it could provide. Sighing, he tapped his head against the wall lightly, trying to get the urge to do some real damage out of his head. He tried concentrating on the fifties science fiction movie that was flickering on the screen, but he had seen it a dozen times

and had lost interest long ago.

The clock read 12:15 a.m. and he longed to get some sleep. He considered calling Scully to see how things were going over at the firehouse but decided against it. Maybe amidst the work they were trying to accomplish she could loosen up a bit and try to relax. He knew Sam needed to relax as badly as any of them, as well. Clicking off the lamp beside his bed, he picked up the remote and started channel surfing. It was his way of going about a little stress relief, by taking out the frustration on the rubberized buttons of the control.

The television was still on when he finally drifted off to sleep.

Early Monday, April 20 Atlanta, Georgia Firehouse Residence of Sam and Chole Waters

"He didn't?" Sam asked when Scully finished talking.

"Seriously, he did. Here we are on our first assignment, and he's screaming we've lost nine minutes and painting a giant X on the blacktop. Needless to say, by then I was pretty sure he was certifiable." She laughed, recalling something that happened so long ago, and earmarked a new part of her life. "Still, I had my quirks on that case, too."

Sam laughed, she had forgotten how nice it felt to laugh easily. "Do tell, Scully."

"Oh, not right now. I think I would like to keep some of my professional integrity intact. Well, what's left of it after five years in the X-Files anyway," she laughed. "By the way, you can call me Dana. Mulder is the only one who has ever called me Scully."

Sam nodded, "All right, Dana. You know, this hasn't been too bad. I think we both needed something of a breather from this case. I just can't believe we can't seem to find a weak spot anywhere. Maybe it's good you are here, it's like we have a ghost on our hands."

"Of everything I've investigated in the X-Files, I don't recall that many ghosts," Scully smiled weakly. "This is just a case of an even worse freak of nature, I'm afraid. Sometimes, I wish I could get inside his head, like you or Mulder might. Just to try and see what makes him tick."

Shaking her head, Sam remarked, "That's just what's so strange about this case. I *can't* really get inside his head. Usually I'm more concerned with getting out in time, but this time I can't find the door at all. From the discussions we've had this week, neither can Mulder. However, why is it I get the feeling this is somehow more personal to him that he's letting on?"

For a moment, Scully considered whether or not she should reveal to Sam the reason Mulder took these kinds of abduction cases so seriously. She started not to, but after a moments hesitation went ahead. She thought it might help the case in some way, and she knew Mulder trusted Sam as much as he was able to trust anyone other than herself. "It was his sister," she stated silently hoping Mulder would forgive her transgression.

"What?" Sam asked seriously, uncertain of where her statement was leading.

"Mulder's sister, Samantha. She was abducted when she was eight and Mulder was twelve. She was never found, and he has spent his life blaming his self for not saving her. Cases like this are always personal to him. There's been more than once I've pulled him back from the brink of madness practically, because of this guilt. When he looks at those little girls, he sees her. Maybe that's why it was him of all people that started having the nightmares."

For a moment Sam just sat speechless. There was little she could say to Dana's statement. She had felt since she first met him that Mulder had a ulterior motive, a more personal one, for seeing this case solved. Now she knew why.

"It's what motivates almost everything he does. That is what defined Mulder as the man he is. It's sad in a way, not only was his sister's childhood ripped away, so was his own. His father blamed him, and he in turn blamed himself." Scully realized she had been rambling somewhat, and not even about her own life's story. Although, his life concerned her as much as her own did. "He is the best friend I never knew possible, and the most important person in my life."

Curiosity got the better of Sam when she asked, "Are the two of you involved romantically?"

"No, although rumors to that effect abound in the Hoover Building grapevine."

"I wasn't sure, but there is something. The two of you have a connection, I've watched how you seem to communicate without words at moments. I'd almost say you were something like soul mates. I hope you don't mind my asking, but do you wish it *were* romantic?" Sam watched her closely as she sought out the right way to phrase her answer.

"Honestly, no. It's hard to explain, but the bond we seem to share isn't defined by such, limited, terms. It's sounds somewhat corny I'd guess you'd say, but I think we were meant to be just friends. In the closest, truest sense of the term possible."

Sam was quiet for a moment, contemplating what Dana had just said before she responded. "It sounds like you've found one of the kinds of relationships we all look for. Only not everyone is so lucky to find them, are they?"

"Don't sound so down," Dana interrupted. "I've see the way one particular agent looks at you when he thinks no one is looking. I would say he's quite head over heels if I've read the situation right." Sam's eyes widened as she listened to what she was saying. "And, I'd say the feeling was mutual from your end, too." A sly smile had found its way back onto Dana's face as she finished speaking.

"It can't be that obvious, can it?" Scully merely gave her an innocent look and waited on her to continue in her own time. "I've known for awhile that I cared for John. I've not paid attention to what he might be feeling because I can't allow myself to fall in love

with him."

"Mulder told me about Jack, Sam. I can't imagine living with quite such a threat. However, should you really pass up such a chance out of fear? John obviously cares very deeply for you. It's in his eyes." Scully's voice had taken on almost a whisper-like quality toward the end.

Sam could see the logic in what Dana was saying, yet that logic was locked in a battle with the overwhelming dread she felt at the possibility of losing someone else she loved so dearly. "Is love really worth it, Dana?"

Recalling Emily's face, Dana didn't hesitate in her answer. "Yes. I think you think so to, somewhere deep down. Love is where the hope is."

Both were startled when Scully's cell phone rang quietly, interrupting the conversation. Pulling the phone out of her bag, she punched send. "Scully."

Muffled breath filled the ear piece and for a moment Scully was confused. After a mere moment, it hit her who it was. "Mulder?" The breathing was steady, but she had yet to get a verbal answer. Sam watched as the color seemed to drain from Dana's face. "Mulder? Talk to me, what's wrong?"

He uttered only one word before Scully's heart sank, "Nightmare."

Monday, April 20 Atlanta, Georgia Ramada Hotel, South Lakewood Drive

Immediately following Mulder's phone call at a quarter till two, Sam and Scully were in Sam's car rushing to the hotel. Running down the hallway to Mulder's room, she pounded on the door earning some complaints from the neighboring guests. Although to Scully, there was nothing outside of Mulder and herself. To both Scully and Sam it felt like an eternity later when Mulder answered the door, looking worse than he did after the last round of nightmares.

"He's watching her, Scully. He's just waiting for his chance to grab her." Mulder was speaking very fast, and Sam was shocked by how greatly the dream had affected him. Scully managed to get Mulder dressed well enough to be seen in public and the three agents headed for the office. While en-route, Sam had Scully call Bailey and alert him to the newest development. He in turn alerted John, Nathan, George and Grace to the situation. Everyone was to meet in the Command Center at two thirty a.m. in hopes of getting a jump on the kidnaper.

Monday, April 20 Atlanta, Georgia VCTF Offices

"Okay," Bailey said, "let's go over this again. Mulder, you said that in your dream, it was a one story suburban house. Right?" Mulder nodded his head, in his mind he was scanning every second of the dream he could still see, which for a dream was quite a bit. "Blue paint, dark paneling. You also mentioned a white Chevrolet Malibu in the driveway. I hate to say it, but that is a fairly common car. You couldn't see the plate?"

Shaking his head no, Mulder commented, "No. It was too dark to read the letters, it was Georgia tags though. There was a light on in the main front room. And he circled around the house, toward the back. A smaller window led to what I assume is the little girl's bedroom. This time the dream was different in that he was only checking the house out, I didn't see him getting away with the girl." He tilted his head for a moment, trying to make out a fuzzy detail when he said, "Wait, I think I saw his car this time. It's a beat up old Ford pick-up truck, looked like it was made in the 1950's."

John looked up from where he had been scanning a written report of the dream Mulder and Bailey were describing. "The problem being, pick-up trucks aren't exactly unheard of in this part of the country. In fact, they probably outnumber cars."

"It's a place to start," Bailey argued. "Let me know if you remember anything else, Mulder." Mulder shook his head in response, and moved to speak with Scully. "George, see how many trucks you can find matching that description. And also, search for a possible match on the house."

George turned to his computer, and commented. "Okay, it's needle in a haystack time."

"If anyone can do it, George. It's you. Just give us what you can. John, Nathan why don't the two of you start calling relators first thing in the morning and see if any of them might be able to place the house. It's a long shot, but we have to work with what we have. Alright everyone, the clock is ticking. We've got until sometime this evening to keep another little girl from being hurt." Bailey instructed. After he was finished speaking for the moment, he returned to his office.

The team was busy for the next few hours, but the action within the office picked up when the regular day shift arrived at eight. John and Nathan manned the phones, calling every relator in the west side area. "Yes, ma'am. That's what I asked, ma'am. We're looking for a specific house. Blue with dark paneling. One story, suburban house. No? Is there someone else in your office that I might speak with that could know? Yes, I'll hold." By the end, John was almost growling into the phone. They had been on the phone for what felt like forever to John. Looking at his watch, he was surprised to see that they had in fact been calling people for three hours. It was already eleven a.m.

Over at his desk about five feet away, John could hear Nathan having similar problems. "Yes, I'm calling in search of a house. Yes. No, I mean I'm looking for a particular house. It's blue with dark paneling, somewhere in the western suburb area. Yes, I know it's a bit of a stretch. One story house. Do you remember anything that might match?" Nathan sighed loudly and rubbed his hand over his eyes. In a distracted moment, he tried to recall just how he got stuck with this particular chore.

"Yes, you do?" Three hours later, Nathan heard what sounded like optimism creeping into John's voice and turned toward where he was sitting. "Yes, one story blue house with dark paneling."

"Mr. Grant," the female relator responded. "I'm not positive, since

the description is so vague, but I think I might know what house you are referring to. It's a mid-size house over on Lily Oaks Avenue."

"Lily Oaks Avenue?" John repeated. "What number?"

"Just a moment, I'll check our records." He could hear keys clicking and she answered, "8952. The only reason I even remember it is because it was a young family. They just purchased the house a couple of months ago. I can email you a photo of the house, if it would help."

Suddenly sitting up straight in his chair, John replied almost eagerly. "Yes. Please do that. I'll give you the correct address to send it to, just one moment."

From his desk, Nathan heard John give the relator the address that would send the photo to George's computer. When he hung up, Nathan walked over to his desk. "You found it?"

Closing his eyes for a moment, John leaned back in his chair. "I think so. She's sending a picture to George. It better be, 'cause this particular avenue of investigation will not only be aggravating, but a dead end as well." Nodding his head in agreement, Nathan began to walk into the meeting room. "Go and see what the picture looks like, Nathan. I'll go get Sam."

Sam looked up when she heard someone knocking on her office door. Seeing John standing there, she waved him in. "Tell me you've found something . . ." John walked in and sat on the edge of her desk. She could see something in the look on his face. "You found the house?" Her question was tinged with restrained hope.

"I just talked to a relator who thinks she knows the house we're looking for. She's sending George a picture of it now. But Sam, do you really think we can rely on Mulder's dream for evidence?"

Sam stood, getting ready to go to Bailey's office and update him. "It's all we have, John. Go find Mulder and Dana and bring them to the conference room. I'll go tell Bailey." As she walked out of her office, John reluctantly followed and went to find them.

Meanwhile, Scully had Mulder cornered in the cafeteria. "How are you feeling?" She made him sit down on one of the plastic chairs and ran a brief check up. She felt his pulse and was satisfied with the result and a minute later, she sat back. "I'm sorry I wasn't last night tonight, Mulder." Pausing to look down at her watch, she realized it was already a quarter after two in the afternoon. "How did it get so late?" She asked, mostly to herself.

Seeing the guilt in his partner's eyes that he'd become so accustomed to seeing in his own led him to play it straight. "It's not your fault, Scully. There would have been nothing you could have done. We had no idea when the next one would strike. Besides, I don't like seeing your eyes so full of regret on my account."

Again taking in his haggard appearance, she persisted. "Mulder, you didn't answer my first question. How are you feeling?" She stressed each word carefully, hoping to avoid their typical 'I'm fine' response. "Mulder?"

He closed his eyes and sagged down in his chair. Running his hands over his face, he replied. "I'm tired, Scully. We've been running non stop on this for a week now. I'm used to running on little sleep and having recurring nightmares, but I'm drained. I'll feel better as soon as we catch this guy and keep him from hurting anymore little girls."

John neared the cafeteria in search of Mulder and Scully, but paused just out of sight of the two agents. He stopped when he heard the voices, not wanting to interrupt at an inopportune moment. When he heard Mulder describing sleepless nights and recurring nightmares, it suddenly occurred to him why Sam had taken such an immediate liking to the pair. In Mulder, for some reason, she found a grief similar to her own. He was curious what had led to Mulder's grief, but doubted he would ever know.

In an instant, he discovered a new found respect for the man he had distrusted and sought to disprove at every opportunity for the past week. While still acting for the good of the team as a whole, he had managed to throw obstacles in Mulder's path each chance he had. He might be stubborn, but he forced himself to admit he had misread Fox Mulder. Hearing a lull in the conversation, he cleared his throat and entered the large room.

Both of the room's two occupants turned toward the noise and saw John walking toward them. "Sam asked me to come find you. We may have a lead."

Mulder and Scully both stood and followed John out of the cafeteria and toward the meeting room. "What have you found?" Scully's question was straight to the point.

John turned sideways as he pushed open a door and held it for the other to agents to walk through. As he did, he responded. "When we were calling the local relators that deal in the area we're concentrating on, one thought she remembered the house we described. Apparently, if this is it, a young family bought it recently. Now we just need you to verify that it is the house from your dream." Having reached the conference table, each took their seat.

"Thanks for the recap, John." Mulder said, an uneasy truce seeming to develop between them. John nodded his head silently and sat down. Sam walked in a minute later and took her seat between the two men. While they waited on Nathan and Bailey to arrive, George was already behind his computer typing commands to bring up the relator's photo of the house.

Scully felt Mulder stiffen in his seat beside her and looked over at him concerned. "Mulder, what is it? What's wrong?" She placed her hand on his arm, hoping to draw him out of whatever was bothering him. When she was finally able to see his eyes, she understood.

"Scully . . . " His whispered voice almost seemed to echo and brought most of the noise in the room to a sudden halt. "That's the house." Mulder turned to look at the other agents at the table, Nathan and Bailey having arrived seconds after his announcement. He turned to Bailey, his face still ashen, and said, "That is the house."

Bailey nodded his head in acknowledgment. "Okay, people. That means we have a chance. We've lost a lot of time searching for it." He paused looking down at his watch. "It's already three. We have to hurry. All right people, let's go."

Monday, April 20 Atlanta, Georgia En-Route to 8952 Lily Oaks Avenue

John slammed his palm against the steering wheel and muttered. "Damn. Stupid traffic."

Mulder, who was sitting in the passenger seat, turned to look at John. "Does rush hour in Atlanta always start this early?" He turned his gaze back out onto the crowded city street they were trying to navigate. "In D.C. we usually have until at least four before it starts to pick up. Especially heading out toward the suburbs."

"Not usually. Today must just be our lucky day. We've already lost nearly half an hour. By the time we get to the house, it will be after five."

Mulder closed his eyes momentarily, "That will cut our safe window down to at most four hours. We need time to set up surveillance." He paused for a second. "We just need to keep this creep from having a chance to grab another little girl."

Scully and Sam sat in the back seat of the car, listening to the exchange between Mulder and John. Scully was just hoping that Mulder would be able to keep it together both until and after they caught the guy.

Monday, April 20 Atlanta, Georgia 8952 Lily Oaks Avenue

Sometime later they had taken up positions around the house. "All teams, call in." Bailey's voice crackled over the radio. He was in the van with George running surveillance equipment and another agent just down the street on the front side of the house. They had called the family that lived in the house and instructed them to stay in the interior rooms of the house and keep a close eye on their children. They didn't want to scare the kidnaper off by evacuating the family, and lose the chance to grab him. Confused, the family complied when warned against the consequences possible otherwise.

Mulder and Scully took up positions within direct line of sight of the little girl's bedroom window. Sam and John were watching the bedroom window of her older brother. Scully's eyes had shot to where Mulder was when Bailey revealed that Stacey Lynn Marshall had a brother that was three years older than her. She knew the stakes had been raised by that one statement. If they lost the little girl, Mulder would never forgive himself, for in Bobby Marshall he saw himself twenty-five years before.

Minutes passed and turned into hours. Soon, the sun had faded from the sky and lights started coming on across the quiet suburban neighborhood. Scully wore a pair of night vision goggles and kept a close eye on the window. Mulder held the radio, and had just finished checking in with Sam when Bailey's voice sounded quietly through the speaker. "Possible sighting. Coming your way teams one and two." One and two were the designations for Mulder and Scully and Sam and John, because they were in the closest proximity to the house. If he went

for the window, they would be the one's to grab him.

Mulder was on alert, his senses ready for the coming confrontation. Scully was scanning the area's around the window and along the wall in either direction. He was at the window before anyone even knew where he had come from. "We've got him," Scully called. Scully watched as Mulder rushed forward not thinking, and attempted to tackle the suspect to the ground. Procedure had been forgotten in the rush of the moment to capture the kidnaper. Although being as quiet as possible, the suspect heard their approach and turned just as Mulder reached him.

What they hadn't seen was the knife that the kidnaper had in his hand. Mulder realized too late that he was swinging the knife outward. Momentum carried him forward into the kidnaper's body. Fire lanced through his chest as he fell onto the knife. When the suspect attempted to get up off the ground where both he and Mulder had fallen and run, John and Sam hurried up behind him. Scully, who had been following behind Mulder, dropped to her knees beside the fallen agent.

"Hold it, buddy. Don't even think about it." Forcing the knife out of his hand, John pulled his hands behind his back and manipulated them into handcuffs. Sam was on the radio calling for back up and medical assistance.

Scully was frantically trying to control the bleeding in Mulder's chest. "Sam," she called. When Sam knelt down beside Mulder, she continued. "Place pressure here, would you?" Watching how Scully was in control of the situation, she marveled at her ability to click over into professional mode when her partner needed her. "Come on, Mulder. Don't you dare do this to me. What were you thinking anyway, huh? You knew better than to try that, but that's not what you were thinking about was it? This was only about stopping any other child from being hurt, wasn't it?" Scully kept up a steady stream of conversation with her partner, even if he was unable to talk back.

"How bad is it?" Sam asked.

Scully's gaze focused on Mulder's face. "Bad, but it's hard to tell how bad. He," she looked over at the man in handcuffs that John was leading away with disgust, "pulled the blade out at a different angle than it went in. So it's a wider cut than it might have been. Also, I'm worried about the location of the stab wound. It's possible it hit his left lung, but I can't tell."

The distant wail of an ambulance echoed through the neighborhood and both women willed it to arrive faster. Scully picked up Mulder's hand and held it for a moment, before taking over holding pressure on the wound from Sam. "Dana!" At Sam's exclamation, Scully looked to see Mulder struggling to open his eyes.

A scratchy sound came from Mulder as he sought to speak, finally managing a strangled, "Scully . . . "

"I'm here Mulder, don't try to talk." Her order for him to not speak didn't stop her from asking, "Why, Mulder?" The only answer she received was a choked cough from Mulder's throat. Her world slowed when a thin trickle of blood drained from his mouth. "Oh, God. Sam,

help me get him on his side." Understanding the urgency behind Scully's words, she helped to prop him up on his side so he could still breathe.

Looking over Dana's shoulder, she saw the approaching medical team. "The ambulance is here." Scully looked over her shoulder, but her gaze quickly returned to where her partner lay. She felt for his pulse and found it faint and racing, the same as when she checked when he had first been hurt. Sam stood and waved the medics over to where they were.

"What do we have?" One of the men asked.

"Stab wound, hit the left lung. He's going into shock, his pulse is racing." Scully tried to fill them in, and was upset when they pushed her away from his side. After stabilizing him as best they could, they lifted him onto a stretcher and began to carry him to the ambulance with Scully close on their heels. She wasn't going to let him out of her sight.

John walked over to where Sam was standing looking down at her hands. "You alright?" She nodded her head and looked up at where he was looking at her with concern in his eyes. She recalled her conversation with Dana about love being worth the risk, and events such as had just occurred served to remind her yet again how quickly a chance can pass.

As if seeing her debate, John pulled her into his arms. "It's over, Sam. Mulder'll be okay and we caught the bastard that's been hurting so many little girls." John pulled back and looked at the woman he had just been holding in his arms. Again, there was little question why his feelings for her were so strong, even shaken she radiated a strength from within.

"Sorry, about your shirt, John." She pointed at the large blood smear across the front of his dress shirt where her hands had been.

He smiled softly, "No problem. Let's go get you cleaned up, okay?" She nodded her head. John placed his arm around her shoulders and kissed her lightly on top of the head. "What would I do without you, Sam?" he mused. After pausing to let Sam wash her hands, they walked over to where they had parked the car only hours before. "Let's go to the hospital and check on Mulder and Scully. She could probably use the support." He held the door open for Sam, and then walked around to the drivers side, climbed in and started the car.

Monday April 20 Atlanta, Georgia Mercy Hospital, Emergency Waiting Room

Scully had been alternating between pacing and sitting for the hour since Mulder had been brought in to the hospital. He had been taken to emergency surgery as soon as they had arrived and a volunteer had insisted that Scully remain in the waiting room no matter what her credentials were as a doctor. For the moment, she was seated in one of the formed plastic chairs trying to not stare at the clock. She knew Mulder's chances were worse the longer he remained hidden away back in surgery. What the doctor in her knew as fact, the partner and best friend part of her refused to listen to.

She paid little attention to the sounds of the automatic doors

opening and closing randomly throughout the course of her stay in the waiting area. It was this reason that she didn't realize that Sam and John had arrived until they walked up next to where she sat. "Hi, Sam. John."

Sam noted with concern how shaky Dana looked, and that she still had Mulder's blood on her hands and clothes. It was startling how the in control doctor had been replaced with concerned partner when she didn't have something to keep her occupied. "Dana, why don't we go to the bathroom and get you cleaned up? The nurses probably have some scrubs you can change into." Sam placed her hand on Dana's forearm, and Scully looked down at herself and saw the blood for the first time.

Scully nodded her head, saying "Okay, that sounds like a good idea. John, you'll say here in case the doctor comes out right?"

John looked at the woman before him, he saw a strength in her similar to that he loved in Sam. "Of course, I wouldn't think of anything else." He watched as Sam led Scully to the nearest bathroom and sat back into one of the uncomfortable chairs. Hurry up and wait time, he hated the hurry up and wait part of the job.

Meanwhile, Sam and Dana had retreated to the nearest bathroom after a quick stop at the nurses station to borrow some extra scrubs. Scully scrubbed at her hands and arms for almost ten minutes, and then she started trying to clean her fingernails. "You'd think by now I'd be a little more used to this type of situation where Mulder is involved, but the feeling of your heart falling into your stomach never seems to go away."

Sam smiled faintly. "I know the shock can be the worst. I've personally never had to go through the waiting, that factor has always be kept from me. I don't know whether I wished it had or not." She made eye contact with Scully in the mirror and a knowing glance passed between them.

"I can't even begin to imagine the pain you've gone through." She finished rinsing her hands and pulled a towel from the dispenser. "However, I do know just in the time I've known you, you've shown yourself to be one of the strongest individuals I've met."

Leaning against the counter, Sam spoke. "All I strive to do is to continue to live my life, to not let Jack live it for me."

Scully retreated into one of the stalls to change out of her now dried and stiffened clothes and into the green scrubs. "That," she said, her voice slightly muffled by the rustle of material, "is strength." A moment later she stepped out of the stall, almost looking like the events of the night hadn't happened. The only way you could see the stress she was still feeling, was to look in her clouded blue eyes. "What a mess," she commented when she looked at her reflection in the mirror, trying to tame her hair slightly.

"You look fine. Exactly what Mulder will want to see when he wakes up." Sam smiled as she spoke, hoping to at least try and soothe Dana's shattered nerves. Scully responded with a struggled half smile of her own. "Tonight showed me something though. Actually, it was something I already knew, just didn't want to face."

Her interest piqued, Scully turned to face Sam directly. "Really?"

Sam cleared her throat, and responded. "Ever since Jack, I've kept a shield around myself when it came to personal relationships. It became hard to let anyone too close, I didn't want to risk them catching Jack's eye for whatever reason he might choose. I had gambled once and lost. The lesson tonight forced me to remember, was that life is too short to pass up the chances it offers us. I blocked that part out, in an attempt to justify my pushing others away."

"And now?"

Sam smiled, "You're not going to let me get out of this are you? Tonight when I looked at John, after you had left, I let myself feel. I allowed myself to actually *feel* the emotions I'd been keeping buried. I looked in his eyes, and I knew. I love him, Dana. Tonight was the exclamation mark on the idea of not passing up chances. I can't live my life with another 'what if?'"

Scully's smile widened. While Sam had been speaking she had been preoccupied to the point she hadn't heard the door swing open. John had stuck his head in slightly to make sure it was safe to enter and then walked in. For the last three sentences of her last comment, he had been standing there silently listening with a shocked look on his features. "Sam, I think it's time you told him that." Turning to where he was standing, she asked, "John, is the doctor back?" When he shook his head yes, her entire demeanor changed and she rushed from the room.

Turning slowly, Sam met John's shocked eyes. "You heard?"

"I heard," he nodded his head slowly. "As much as I'd like to be doing somersaults at this revelation, we should probably get back out there. The doctor said he pulled through, but lost a lot of blood. He's in recovery at the moment. Bailey just arrived, too."

Slowly, Sam walked over to where John was waiting. "Let's get going then, I want to be there if Dana needs anything." John held out his hand and Sam tentatively took it.

"You two really hit it off, didn't you?" John asked as he held the door open.

"Last Friday night, she had gone back to the hotel for some paperwork and Mulder and I started talking. I had noticed there was an inner strength about her, and some things he told me explained it. We have some things in common that makes it easier to associate with her. In a general sense, we can empathize with each other."

"And Mulder?" he asked as they neared the waiting room.

"Is in a word, tortured. Brilliant and very emotional. Have you noticed you can read his eyes? They're very expressive. Each of them is fiercely protective of the other. They practically embody the definition of partners and best friends. One without the other would most likely be incomplete."

John smiled softly, "Is that a professional opinion?"

"Ha." Her reply was cut off when they caught up to Scully who, along with Bailey, was still speaking to the doctor. "How's he doing?" Sam asked in between questions from Scully.

It was the doctor who answered. "He's stable. As I was telling Dr. Scully and Mr. Malone, he suffered a great amount of blood loss. The damage to the lung was the worst of the trauma and we operated to close the tear. We've managed to clear his lung, although he is still on assisted breathing until he wakes up. I assure you, it's just a precaution we take in situations like these."

"Do you know about how long he will be unconscious?" Scully was again in professional mode, she knew that Mulder needed clear heads not emotional babble. As it was, emotion was something she was uncomfortable with displaying for others to view. It was this that led to her title of 'The Ice Queen' among those in D.C. Sometimes she wished she could beat them over the head with the differences in *feeling* something and letting others view it.

The doctor regarded the four sets of eyes that had fallen on him, waiting on an answer. "I wish I knew, Dr. Scully. He's being moved from recovery to low-level ICU shortly. We'll keep a close eye on his vitals and wait and see. Right now, it's all up to him."

It was Bailey who asked, "Low-level ICU?"

"He will be in a room, but still under near constant supervision. I'll have Nurse Holland come and let you know the room number as soon as he is moved. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to get back to my patients." He turned and walked back toward the trauma area.

Tuesday, April 21 Atlanta, Georgia Mercy Hospital, Room 508

After fifteen more minutes of waiting, Nurse Holland finally emerged with Mulder's room number. The key difference between this particular adventure of her's and Mulder's and any previous one, was she actually had some company while she was forced to wait. Although Bailey had been forced to leave soon after the doctor had spoken to them, Sam and John stayed close by her side through the night.

About six a.m., John had left to go home and change before heading to the office to start on the paperwork for the case. Sam walked him out from Mulder's room and down the hall to the elevator. "Thanks for staying," she whispered.

Kissing her forehead softly, he whispered back, "There's no need to thank me. I love you. When you need me, I'll be there. No questions asked. Besides, Mulder's not nearly annoying as I originally thought. That might be because since he's unconscious he can't talk, I'm not sure." Sam knew by the tone of his voice and the smile on his face that he was just kidding. She also knew that with John Grant when you made it into the ranks of being harassed, you were okay.

Smiling, she scolded, "That's awful."

"Part of my charm." His smile grew a bit larger. "See you later? I'll

come back by sometime before lunch. Call me if anything changes, or if you just want to talk. Okay?"

His blue eyes had softened, and Sam felt herself slowly sinking in their depths. "You bet." John leaned his head down and their lips met in a gentle kiss, just prior to the chime of the elevator. Pulling back from the warm embrace he and Sam had been sharing, he stepped onto the elevator. "I love you," he mouthed silently. "Love you, too." Sam whispered. "Talk to you later." When the elevator doors closed, she walked back down the hallway to where Scully was sitting diligently beside Mulder's bed.

Scully awoke with a start, with no memory of having fallen asleep. Quickly, she checked on her partner to make sure he was still asleep, and turned to look behind her. "I'm sorry, Dana. Did I wake you?" Sam had just walked into the room when she saw Dana jump in her chair, having obviously finally collapsed in the poorly padded chair.

Rubbing her eyes, she responded. "No. It's okay. I should be awake anyway. I don't even remember falling asleep." Looking around she noticed for the first time that John was not there. "When did John leave?"

"About ten minutes ago, he had to go to work. That's where I went, I walked him to the elevator. I think you finally fell over from exhaustion about five minutes before that." Sam smiled as she spoke. Her face fell somewhat when she followed Dana's gaze back to the still body of her partner. "How is he?"

Standing up to stretch, she answered. "The same. I keep thinking he'll wake up sometime soon. Although, he's a hell raiser in the hospital when he's awake. So maybe it's a good thing he's recovering like this for a little while." A light came back into her eyes as she remembered several other hospital stays that Mulder had made her miserable during. Each time, she had mostly been glad just for him to be alive and coherent, however he never failed to try her patience.

Seeing her face lighten, Sam wondered out loud. "He's a whiner when he's stuck in the hospital, huh?"

"You better believe it. He'll have you running for the doors. It makes you wonder sometimes, just why he does so many stupid things to get put back in the hospital if he hates it so much."

"A real paradox, I'd say." Sam had taken the extra chair by the window while Dana had been speaking. "I bet he likes to complain a lot about minor things too, right? He seems the type to ignore major injuries, but play off the small ones for attention." She knew by Dana's answering laugh that she had hit the nail on the head.

Dana moved to stand by the window and watched the sun begin to come up over downtown Atlanta. "Oh, you're right about that. It can be amusing. When I'm not annoyed out of my mind, or terrified." Shaking her head as if to clear her thoughts, Dana turned to Sam. "So, did you talk to John?"

"We talked. He told me he loved me, and for the first time since Tom died, I felt that spark, you know?" She looked at Dana's faint smile

before continuing. "Like a small burst of lightning hit me in the heart. We've decided to give it a shot and see what happens, he went out with my roommate a while back, so that might lead to some awkward moments. Either way, I think we have a shot at pulling it off."

Looking at her Dana asked, "It?" The look in her eyes hinted at amusement.

Grinning, Sam replied, "What is it with all of you with your minds in the gutter?" She heard a noise behind Dana, and she looked over at where Mulder was just starting to struggle to open his eyes. Seeing her reaction, Scully turned and rushed to the bedside.

"Mulder?" Placing one of her hands on his arm, and brushing a lock of hair away from his forehead with another, she continued speaking to him. "Can you hear me, Mulder? Don't struggle against the ventilator tube, okay?" When his eyes were completely open she knew it was useless to try and reason with him, the panic in his eyes was enough to tell her they better remove the ventilator quickly. "Sam?"

She was already standing, and walking toward the door. "On it. I'll go find Dr. McDonald." Sam hurried out of the room in search of the doctor, while Scully continued to talk to Mulder. A couple of minutes later she managed to calm Mulder down enough that he might be able to avoid hurting himself anymore.

After only a few minutes, Sam came back to the room with Mulder's doctor in tow. "I hear our patient is awake," the doctor said as he walked across the room.

"Awake and fighting the vent," Scully replied. "There's no reason to leave it in, is there?"

Dr. McDonald placed his stethoscope on Mulder's chest to listen to the area around where his lung had been damaged. "You're right, Dr. Scully. I'd say its high time we took him off of the vent." Scully backed up to stand by Sam while the doctor took care of removing the tube from Mulder's throat. When he finished, he motioned for Scully to follow him out in the hall. "It's very important," he said once the door closed behind them, "that Mr. Mulder move as little as possible for the next few days, so as to not tear the stitches in the lung tissue. As to how long he will have to stay in the hospital, that will be determined by how his lung appears to be healing."

"What's is your best guess at how soon he might be able to leave, doctor?" Scully asked.

Sighing, he took off his glasses before speaking. "Not before tomorrow. And that will be pushing it. I'll check on him later today, and we'll see how fast he's progressing. I need to attend to my rounds right now, so I'll speak with you around, say," he paused to look at his watch, "eleven this morning."

He turned to leave after Scully replied, "Thank you, doctor."

She walked back into Mulder's room and saw Sam feeding him some ice chips. His eyes brightened somewhat when he saw his partner. "Hey, Scully," he managed to rasp.

Smiling, she responded, "Don't try to talk too much, Mulder. Let your throat rest for a little while. Sam I can take over there if you want me to." As she was speaking, Mulder signaled that he had eaten enough ice for the time being and Sam sat the cup down on the bedside table.

They were startled when the phone on the table began to ring at almost the same moment Sam sat the glass down. A curious look on her face, Sam answered the phone. "Hello?" Handing the phone to Dana, she shrugged her shoulders and said, "It's for you."

"Hello? Hi, Mom." She paused, listening to Maggie Scully's questions. "He's out of danger now. Wait a minute, how'd you know to call, Mom?" Another pause, both Mulder and Sam watched her as she took the one-sided call. "Director Skinner? How'd he know, I wonder?"

She was interrupted by the director's voice, surprising each of them. "Agent Malone called me, Scully. You should have, but I'm assuming you were otherwise occupied." Skinner's words were strict, but his voice betrayed his concern. As Scully continued her conversation with her mother over the phone, Skinner moved to stand closer to the bed. "I'm Assistant Director Skinner, Mulder and Scully's boss at the Bureau. I don't believe we've been introduced."

Sam took his extended hand and exchanged the strong handshake. "I'm Sam Waters, I work at the VCTF with Bailey Malone."

"Sam Waters . . ." Skinner's head tilted to the side as he tried to place the name. "I've heard of you, Dr. Waters. You're one of the best profilers in the Bureau, am I correct?"

Sam would have blushed if it were in her character. "Something to that extent, Sir. Although I must say, working together with Dana and Mulder was beneficial. If not for their involvement, we might not have caught this guy." Skinner nodded his head in acknowledgment of her comments.

Turning his attention back to Mulder, Skinner asked, "How are you feeling after yet another trip to emergency surgery, Agent Mulder?" He wasn't surprised when Mulder merely rolled his eyes in response to the question. Scully ducked between them to replace the phone in the receiver. "Is everything alright with your mother, Agent Scully?"

"Yes, sir. She said to thank you for calling her. If I may ask, Sir, what made you even think to call my mother?" Sometimes Scully wondered just how many surprises Walter Skinner had hiding up his sleeve or behind his wire-framed glasses.

Skinner straightened his tie, somewhat uncomfortably. "After enough trips to several emergency rooms with the two of you, I've learned how to play the game. Actually," he continued, "your mother and I had awhile to talk the last time we ran into each other in the hospital. I don't even recall the exact event, but she asked that if I would call her when something else happened. She knew you probably wouldn't. And for some reason, I knew she would want to know if it was Mulder, as well."

Scully laughed, "Yes, she seems to have adopted him as one of her

own. Just what I need, another big brother."

Mulder coughed, "Don't compare me to Bill, please." Scully looked at Mulder whose eyes were a mix of anxiety and contempt for Bill. Although she had never admitted it, she knew of the less than friendly relationship her partner and her brother shared. She had overheard a conversation between them while she had been in the hospital, and ever since her recovery, had done her best to keep them apart. The humor in her eyes died for just an instant when her train of thought led her to remember Emily. "Scully?" Her eyes met Mulder's again, and she knew he had seen the shadow pass over her eyes. She could read the concern written in his hazel eyes and the tone of his hoarse voice.

Smiling, she only said, "Mulder, between you and Bill, Jr. there is no comparison. The difference is astounding."

Skinner cleared his throat, hearing Mulder's raspy voice had made his own throat constrict. "I have to catch a commuter flight back to D.C. so I need to leave. Mulder," he said, making eye contact with him, "I expect you and a stack of insurance papers back in Washington as soon as it's safe for you to travel, all right?" He paused and turned to look at Scully, "Agent Scully, I'll see both of you when the doctor decides it's best, not before. Is that understood?"

She nodded her head, "Yes, Sir."

Sam, having retreated to the widow seat during their conversation, walked over to stand by Mulder's bed when Skinner left the room. "Nice guy," she commented.

Mulder half laughed, half coughed at her statement. Scully slapped him on the shoulder very lightly. "Don't mind him," she humorously scolded. Mulder looked up at Scully with his patented puppy dog look and she laughed even more. "As bosses go, he's not so bad," Scully agreed. "And don't give me that look Mulder. I have protection from those eyes, I'm immune."

A knock on the door interrupted their joking, and John stuck his head in. "How's everything going?" he asked as he walked into the room. "Nice to see you awake, Mulder." Mulder, for his part, was somewhat taken aback by the difference in John's ever-changing attitude toward him. In an attempt to save his voice, his reply was only a brief nod.

"It's going much better, now." As she spoke, Scully watched the way John looked over at Sam. She could tell a difference from just last week. Both of their eyes lit up when they saw each other. Not minding the extra attention as much as he might regularly, John walked over and took Sam's hand. "How is the case finishing up?" Scully asked.

"The guy, Ronnie Duncan, wasn't in the interrogation room for ten minutes before he was spilling his guts. It turns out that Stacey Marshall was a student at LeMay Elementary, we were right about he was finding the girls. Anyway, it turns out you were right too, Sam." When she looked at him oddly, he continued. "It turns out when he was little, his big sister was abused by their parents. Eventually, when she was a teenager, she killed herself. The event scarred him. When he saw those girls, he still saw his sister. In his mind, he was

easing their pain and ending their torment. He didn't differentiate between the other families and his own."

The room had gone silent while John had been speaking. It was Sam who spoke first. "Something like this didn't come out of no where, John. Did he have any priors? Any other similar cases where a suspect was never found?"

"Actually yes." John smiled, he would never cease to be amazed by Sam's ability to read a situation and follow it to it's end. "There was a warrant out for his arrest for a kidnaping attempt in Ohio. Also, when we went through the database, we found two other strings of kidnapings that had similar M.O.'s. One was in Virginia and the other was in Kentucky. Each time he changed the way he killed the girls. Right now, Bailey has him under lock and key. There is no way this guy is going to hurt anymore little girls."

Scully smiled, "I guess that's something." Her smile faded as she added, "But I wonder just how many girls he 'helped' before we managed to catch him?"

John lowered his eyes before he responded. "The best total we have is thirteen. Each location with the unsolved kidnapings and murders had a total of five. Five girls in Virginia, five in Kentucky and three here." No one said anything in response to John's final statement. Scully sat in the chair beside the bed, her gaze falling on the floor. There was nothing that could be said to such an obscene loss in life such as this. Each of the group could only console themselves with the fact that he was finally off of the streets and wouldn't hurt anymore little girls.

Wednesday, April 22 Atlanta, Georgia Mercy Hospital, Room 508

"Okay, Mr. Mulder," Dr. McDonald was saying, "I'll clear you to leave on one condition. You have to be very careful. You are going to be quite sore for a while, especially once you are out of this bed for a little while. Also, I'm releasing you to Dr. Scully's care, is that understood?"

Knowing it was the only way he would be able to escape the hospital, Mulder agreed silently to the doctors orders. He knew that Scully would be keeping a very close eye on him for a while anyway. The pattern was one both of the partners was familiar with. He watched as Dr. McDonald walked slowly from the room and turned his gaze to where Scully was sitting. "Time to get out of this joint, Scully." Sam and John had each gone home the night before, they were both about to drop from exhaustion after being up for around forty-eight hours.

She nodded in response. "For the moment, Mulder, you're not going any further than the hotel. I don't want you running all over Atlanta under whatever pretense you try and dream up, and I really don't want you stuck on a commuter flight just yet. Agreed?"

His smile somewhat dimmed by Scully's drill Sargent mentality, Mulder agreed with little argument. He settled for a jab instead. "Yes, Mom."

"Okay, I'm going to go get the paperwork started and have a nurse

come in to help you get dressed." As she was walking out of the room she heard Mulder begin to argue about the nurse, and added, "Not a word, Mulder."

Wednesday, April 22 Atlanta, Georgia Ramada Hotel, South Lakeside Drive

"How is he feeling?" Sam had driven over around lunch to check on both Dana and Mulder.

Scully hadn't moved from the chair she had fallen into immediately after getting Mulder to lay down in his bed. "Asleep, for the moment. Honestly, I think he's a little sore, but he's been worse. On the Mulder scale, this barely rates a four." Sam sat a paper bag down onto the table by Dana's chair and Dana eyed it eagerly. "Is that what I think it is?"

Laughing, Sam sat down on the edge of the bed. "I thought you could use some non-hospital food. It's a bit on the greasy side, but what can I say, John picked the restaurant."

Scully dug into the food quickly, she had forgotten how long it had been since she had eaten anything other than Mulder's left over Jell-o. "How are things there?" Scully managed to get the question out in between bites of the hamburger.

"Good. We may actually get a chance to go out this weekend. Say, I can sit with Mulder in case he needs anything if you want to get some sleep. I bet you didn't get hardly any again last night." Sam could tell by the look on her face as she finished the burger and fries that she was right.

"Sam, you've already missed a lot of work because of us. You don't have to stay here and babysit Mulder, it's a job I've grown sadly accustomed to."

"No arguments, Dana. You need the sleep, and it can't hurt to have someone keep an eye on him right now. Besides, I brought some paperwork with me, just in case." As she spoke, Sam maneuvered Dana toward the bed in the center of the room. Lack of sleep finally causing her to give in, Dana kicked off her shoes and fell onto the bed. Sam crossed over to the unlocked connecting door and said, "Goodnight." Opening the door, she went into Mulder's room and pulled the door closed behind her.

Scully closed her eyes and fell into a deep dreamless sleep.

In the room next door, Mulder woke up to find Sam sitting in a chair by the window reading over some paperwork. "Sam?" She looked up from where she had been reading and smiled. "Where's Scully?"

"She's next door getting some sleep. She's been running nonstop since before you decided to jump a man holding a knife."

Mulder's gaze fell to the floor, but not before she saw the regret filter across his eyes. "Yeah, I tend to do boneheaded moves like that a lot."

"Mulder, if you didn't do 'boneheaded' things like that half the time, I wouldn't recognize you. I'd be left wondering which alien

clone was impersonating my partner." Scully's voice was sleepy, but her tone was joking.

He winced when he turned a bit too quickly to look over where Scully had walked into his room. "Hi, Scully."

"Hey, partner. Are you feeling better?" When he nodded his head, she turned her attention to Sam. "Thanks for staying with him."

Stacking her papers, Sam smiled. "No problem. However, I better be getting back to the office." She pulled the strap of her attache case onto her shoulders. "I'll see the two of you tomorrow?"

Mulder looked over at where Scully was standing awaiting her answer. "Yeah, we'll come in before our flight back to Washington."

Sam nodded and walked over to the door. "Okay then, see you tomorrow." With that she opened the door and stepped out into the hallway, pulling door shut behind her.

A few minutes later, Mulder slowly climbed out of his bed, and went into the small bathroom. Scully sat down in the chair Sam had just vacated and waited on him to reappear. When he emerged from the bathroom, he picked up his running shoes and started to lace them up. Seeing what he intended to do, Scully jumped out of the chair and grabbed the left shoe while he was busy lacing up the right. "Mulder, what do you think you're doing?"

He looked at her for a second, confused by her question. "What do you mean, Scully? I'm bored, I want to go for a run." She had to fight to keep from laughing. "What?"

"What?" She repeated somewhat loudly. "Mulder, you wouldn't get five feet. And that's only if you managed to get past me. Take off the shoe, and get back in the bed."

"Oh, Scully. You gonna join me?" In response she merely rolled her eyes, and steered him back toward the bed. "All right, all right. I'm going. Geez, Scully. You're a regular slave driver." Having given in and taken off his running shoe, he climbed back into the bed. "Are you going to tuck me in and kiss me goodnight, Scully?" The leer in eyes was anything other than little boy like.

"In your dreams, Mulder. Turn the television on if you're bored, but you heard what Dr. McDonald told you. Rest, relax and maybe you'll recover." He could tell by the look on her face that she meant business, that was his Scully, after all.

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"Hey, Mulder. How are you feeling?" Bailey asked when he saw Dana and Mulder approaching his office about nine the next morning. "Dana," he nodded at Scully.

Mulder actually smiled. He was so relieved to be out of his hotel room prison, that he would have been happy to run into almost anyone. Except maybe the likes of Donnie Phaster or the Flukeman. "I'm feeling better, Agent Malone. And really glad to be free of my hotel room." Bailey laughed at his zealous comment, while Scully rolled her

eyes. It was a gesture he seemed to draw out of her more than anyone she had ever known.

"That's good to hear. We can go ahead and walk over to the conference room and finish up the last details on our case." He motioned in the direction of the meeting area with his hand. "I just need to get a few files first." He ducked back into his office, when he returned the three of them crossed the office to meet up with John and Nathan. "Everyone ready?" Bailey asked.

It was John who answered. "We're ready. Sam said she would be here in a minute, there was some last minute paperwork she was getting in order." The four of them took their seats around the large table, while Bailey stood at the head of the table. "Here comes George," John added.

"I just heard some interesting news," George commented before sitting down. After typing a few commands into his computer a picture appeared on the forward screen. "Lock up just called, our killer killed himself in his cell. He left a note, however brief." Another couple of commands later, a copy of the letter replaced the photo of the dead man. "It reads, and I quote. 'Do not judge me for trying to help the helpless. I know he who passes ultimate judgement will understand.'"

"Ultimate judgement?" Nathan asked.

Sam, who had taken her seat when George revealed the suicide, responded. "St. Peter. He's who decides who gains access to Heaven. Mr. Duncan apparently believed that his actions we're justified, even after he was captured. It's not all that uncommon really. I would say his note tells us that he little to no faith our judgement system."

"That, too, is not altogether unheard of in cases like this either," Mulder interrupted, and when Sam deferred, he continued. "He was scarred by his sister's abuse and subsequent death at such an early age, he molded the rules to fit himself. He would have had a very limited scope on the world around him, and his own ideas of what was right and what was wrong."

"He didn't play by our rules," Sam added. "He also didn't want to be judged by our rules. In essence, he took his case to a higher court."

Clearing his throat, John commented, "Well, he's not our problem anymore. Let the morgue boys settle it now." Bailey shook his head silently, but didn't interject.

After a moment of quiet, Scully broke the silence. "Mulder, I'd say that about wraps up our involvement in Atlanta. Our flight leaves in two hours, so we should probably be heading to the airport." Mulder nodded his head in agreement and they both stood up from their seats at the table. "It's back to the basement for us," Scully laughed.

"I can give you a ride to the airport," John offered. Sam glanced at where he had stared to rise from his chair. His offer had surprised her somewhat, but she simply smiled.

Mulder shook his head, "No thanks, you don't have to. We can just catch a cab." Scully was also slightly taken aback by the exchange between the two. They had spent parts of the previous week bickering incessantly. "Scully, you ready?"

"Thanks for everything," she was speaking to the group, but Scully's gaze fell on Sam. "Thanks for being there."

Sam laughed, "Don't just thank us, if it wasn't for your involvement, we might not have found Ronnie Duncan. It's regretful how it ended, but at least now families like Stacey Marshall's don't have to be quite so concerned."

Mulder nodded in agreement his eyes not meeting Sam's. "Yeah," he whispered.

"Isn't a small consolation, supposed to be better than none?" Nathan asked.

No one said anything in response to Nathan's statement. A moment later, Mulder and Scully turned to leave, walking toward the parking deck each still carrying their bags. "If only it ever worked that way," Mulder whispered while they were walking toward the door, so quietly only Scully caught his statement. She placed a hand on his arm gently, knowing there was no adequate reply.

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End
file.